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GROTESQUES AND THE MIME

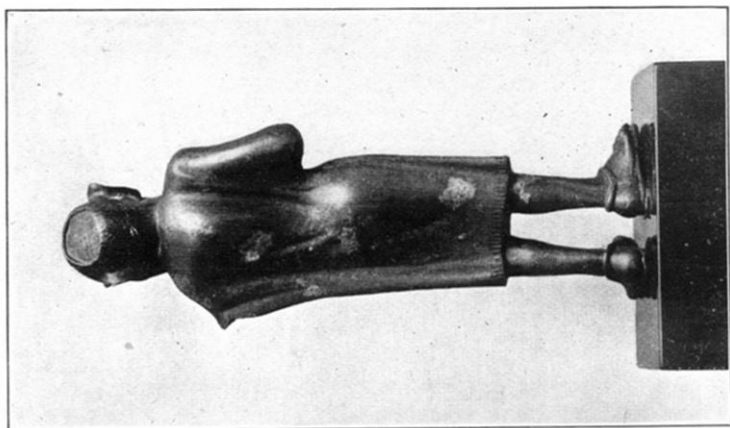
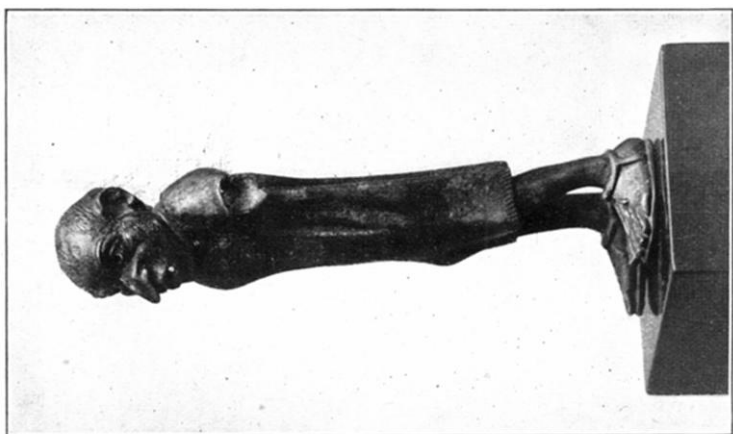
[PLATES V-VI]

THE Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased last year an exceptionally fine bronze figure, of the type usually styled "grotesque." In this article I propose first to publish this statuette, and then to offer a new explanation for such "grotesque" figures, which I venture to hope may prove more satisfactory than those advanced hitherto.

The statuette acquired by the Metropolitan Museum is $3\frac{1}{8}$ in. (10 cm.) high. It represents a man standing with his weight on both feet, the right slightly advanced. Both forearms are missing, but enough remains to indicate their original attitude. The right arm is lowered, and was bent sharply at the elbow; the left arm was extended sidewise. He wears a sleeved tunic, which reaches to below his knees and has a fringed border at the bottom. The grotesque character of the figure is brought out by the hunch on his back and his chest, the large phallus, the enormous head, and the exaggerated features (large ears, long hooked nose, and crooked mouth with protruding teeth at the corners). He has whiskers and short, straight hair, which leaves the temples bald. On the crown of the head is a round, shallow depression, of which the most probable explanation is that it was originally inlaid, perhaps with silver, to indicate a shiny bald spot;¹ even now, with the inlay fallen out, it gives the appearance of a large tonsure.

The execution is excellent; it is both careful and spirited; and the rendering of the face with its half leering, half pathetic

¹ For another statuette with the crown of the head inserted separately cf. *Arch. Ztg.* 1877, p. 78, pl. 10.



"GROTESQUE" FIGURE IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

expression makes of this deformed creature a work of high art. Moreover, technically, this figure is of great interest, illustrating as it does the extreme care with which some ancient bronzes were worked and decorated. Both forearms were evidently made in separate pieces and inserted.¹ The whites of the eyes are of silver; the irises and pupils have fallen out, but were probably either of bronze, glass paste, or precious stones. The two protruding teeth are of silver; the hair and whiskers are covered with a thin foil of niello, and the little buttons on the sleeves of the tunic are also of niello. While the insertion of silver eyes was a common practice in ancient times,² and that of silver teeth is also known from other examples,³ the application of a separate metal for the hair and beard as distinguished from the rest of the figure is, to my knowledge, not known from other examples of classical art.⁴ Though the black niello can now hardly be distinguished from the dark patina, it must originally have been most effective when contrasted with the golden color of the bronze.⁵

The period to which this statuette belongs must be late Greek; at least it is inconceivable that a work of so much spirit and animation and of such masterly technique originated in Roman times; and its style and conception do not permit an earlier dating. The statuette is not a recent find, but has been known for a long time. It formed part of the Ficoroni collection and is described and illustrated in Ficoroni, *De larvis scenicis*, pl. 9, No. 2 (1754); in Wieseler, *Denkmäler des Bühnenspiels*, 1851, pl. XII, No. 11;⁶ in Dieterich, *Pulcinella*, p. 151; and in Reinach, *Répertoire*, II, p. 815, 3. Its provenance appears to be unknown. Wieseler in his short description of the figure calls it a "Mimus oder Privatpossenreisser." That his appellation is correct and applies not only to this and the few

¹ For a case of two ears worked separately cf. Dütschke, *Ant. Bilder. in Oberitalien*, IV, p. 137, No. 342.

² Wieseler, 'Ueber die Einlegung und Verzierung von Werken aus Bronze,' in *Nachrichten von der Ges. der Wiss. zu Göttingen*, 1886, p. 49.

³ Cf. Wieseler, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁴ Cf. Wieseler, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁵ In this connection it is interesting to compare modern Japanese bronzes in which various metals are frequently combined in one figure.

⁶ Wieseler describes the tongue as protruding; he was evidently judging from the illustration of Ficoroni, *De larvis scenicis*, where it has that appearance.

similar figures he enumerates, but to the whole varied class of grotesques, I shall endeavor to show in this paper.

In discussing this subject we must first consider the theories commonly held concerning "grotesque" figures. For, as is well known, a large number of such statuettes have survived, chiefly in bronze and terra-cotta,¹ and various explanations have been given with regard to them.² The most popular and widely held theory was that they were products of the Alexandrian school, their grotesque character being supposed to illustrate the realistic tendencies of that art. A. J. B. Wace, however, in an interesting article on these grotesques in the *Annual of the British School at Athens*, X, 1903-1904, pp. 103 ff., has pointed out that few of them have certainly been found in Egypt, and that the majority came from Italy, Greece, and Asia Minor; also that the workmanship in many cases is rather crude, and belongs to the Roman period. His theory is that at least a large number of them³ served as charms against the evil eye.

In order to show the probable identity of the "grotesques" and the actors in the ancient farcical plays called mimes, I shall first briefly enumerate the chief characteristics of the former, then shortly review what we know of the mimes, and finally see how far the two correspond with each other.

The main characteristics of the grotesque figures, reviewing them as a whole, are the following: they invariably show bodily deformities, such as a hunch, a protruding paunch, crooked legs, and exaggerated features, and they all have one distinguishing mark, a large phallus. Baldness is common, and it is noticeable that many of them have a decidedly moody expression. Their dress is that of everyday life, such as a short tunic, a mantle, a pair of short trousers. Besides caricatures

¹ For the terra-cotta examples cf. Winter, *Die figürlichen Terrakotten*, II, pp. 411, 432 ff.; for those in bronze cf. the list given by Wace, *B.S.A.* X, 1903-4, pp. 105 ff. The marble figures he enumerates on pp. 103-104 do not, to my mind, belong to the same class; they are in no sense grotesques or caricatures, but merely realistically treated genre figures. They have therefore not been included in this article.

² Cf. Pottier-Reinach, *La Nécropole de Myrina*, pp. 476 ff., and the references there cited.

³ He seems to include all the bronzes and a few of the terra-cottas.

of ordinary men and women, some are more specifically represented as hawkers, soldiers, peasants, magistrates, and officials.

Our knowledge of the so-called *μῆμος* is limited, being gleaned merely from a few extant fragments, a number of references by ancient authors, and the recently discovered Mimes of Hero(n)-das, which, however, are not the genuine popular mimes, but a more refined kind of court mimes. Recently E. Reich, in an admirable work entitled *Der Mimos, ein litterar-entwicklungsgeschichtlicher Versuch*, I, Berlin, 1903, has brought together the various sources of our information and has convincingly shown what an important part the mime played in Greek and Roman life. In its broad outlines its history appears to have been as follows: While the epic, the tragedy, and the comedy represented the ideal tendencies of Greek life, there was developed at the same time a strongly realistic drama, entitled *μῆμος*, which with its mimicry, buffoonery, and treatment of everyday topics made a strong appeal to the "man in the street." It originated apparently from the mimic dance, which was occasionally varied by the introduction of stray remarks, and was thus gradually developed into a drama. With the increase in power of the populace the mime grew in importance. In the fifth century B.C. we hear of the actors of mimes travelling from one city to another and appearing as clowns or jugglers at festivals. In the fourth century they were welcome guests at the courts of kings and of distinguished men. One more century and they have obtained a recognized place in literature and on the stage. This was during the Alexandrian epoch, in which the realistic spirit of the lower orders permeated all classes of the community. Then the Romans, practical and material by nature, enthusiastically took up the mime, until the idealistic drama was pushed more and more into the background, and during the first, second, and third centuries A.D. the mime reigned supreme.¹

From what we know of the mime it appears to have been a real drama, in which a number of actors took part.² Besides the principal characters who could impersonate persons of every

¹ Closely associated with the mime are the Oskan Atellanae, the South Italian Phylakes, etc., which may all be regarded as local varieties of it; cf. Reich, *op. cit.*, p. 257, note 1.

² Cf. G. Boissier in Daremberg et Saglio, *Dictionnaire*, under *Mimos*, pp. 1904 f., and the references there given.

variety, from deities and aristocrats to the humblest specimens of humanity, there seems to have been always present a sort of pantaloon, called *μῶρος*, sannius, or stupidus, got up to present a ridiculous appearance. He had to stand a lot of abuse from the other actors and apparently played very much the same rôle as the modern clown.¹ With regard to the costumes worn by the actors on the stage we have some references to show that they wore a variegated coat or centunculus,² and a pointed cap or apex.³ But this seems to apply only to the buffoon, and his costume would naturally not always be the same. As a rule the dress of everyday life seems to have been in use,⁴ just as we see it worn in most of the grotesque figures. No masks or buskins were worn;⁵ and an enormous phallus was a distinguishing mark of actors of mimes.⁶

The importance of the mime during Roman Imperial days is amply attested by continual references to it by contemporary authors. To the early Christian fathers the mime was abhorrent, and again and again they issued warnings against it. Chrysostomus writes: "Through the mouth of the monks Christ speaks, through the mouth of the mime the devil";⁷ "The subjects of the mimes are fables of the devil";⁸ and again "The whole mimic play is a pageantry of Satan."⁹ The classical writers are divided in their opinions, some, the Latin grammarians, for instance, condemning it wholesale,¹⁰ others, such as Cicero and Seneca,

¹ Cf. Mart. *Epigr.* II, 72, 4: Os tibi percisum quanto non ipse Latinus Vilia Panniculi percutit ora sono. Tert. *Spect.* 23; Arnob. VII, 33.

² Apuleius, *Apologia*, XIII, p. 416: Si choragium thymelicum possiderem, nunc ex eo argumentareret etiam, uti me consuesse tragoedi symmate, histrionis crocota, mimi centunculo?

³ Cf. Reich, *op. cit.*, p. 448, note, and the references there cited.

⁴ Cf. Reich, *op. cit.*, pp. 578 ff.

⁵ For the absence of masks see Athenaeus, p. 452: ὅσπερ καὶ τῶν Ἰταλικῶν μίμων ἀριστος γέγονεν αὐτοπρόσωπος ὑποκρίτης, and G. Boissier in Daremberg et Saglio, *Dictionnaire*, under *Mimus*, p. 1900; of buskins, see Juvenal, *Sat.* VIII, p. 191; Gellius, *Noct. Att.* I, 11, 12; Festus, p. 277 M, where the mimes are called planipedes.

⁶ Cf., e.g., Scholiast on Juvenal, VI, 276 (phallum ut habent in mimo); Arnob. VII, 33; and the other references cited by Reich, *op. cit.*, p. 258, note.

⁷ VII, p. 675 B.

⁸ IV, p. 770 D.

⁹ VIII, p. 6 C.

¹⁰ Cf., e.g., Evanthius, *de trag. et com.*, who speaks of the mimus as "a diuturna imitatione vilium rerum et levium personarum" (an imitation of vulgar acts and coarse people).

being more prone to see its good side.¹ The occasional descriptions they give of actors in mimes are important for our purpose. Cicero, in the chapters on ridicule in *de Oratore*, II, chaps. 68-72, often refers to the mimes and speaks of their general deformity, their baldness, and their foolish and ridiculous grimaces. He warns the orator from that sort of ridicule: "quid enim potest esse tam ridiculum quam sannio est? Sed ore, vultu, imitandis moribus, voce, denique corpore ridetur ipso; salsum hunc possum dicere atque ita, non ut eius modi oratorem esse velim, sed ut mimum. qua re primum genus hoc, quod risum vel maxime movet, non est nostrum: morosum, superstitiosum, suspiciosum, gloriosum, stultum; naturae ridentur ipsae, quas personas agitare solemus, non sustinere" (II, 251 f.). "What can be so ridiculous as a clown? But we laugh at his grimaces, his mimicry of other people's characteristics, his voice; in short, his whole person. I can call him witty, not, however, in the way I should wish an orator to be witty, but only the mime. That is why this first method, which particularly makes people laugh, does not belong to us. I mean the crossness, superstitiousness, suspiciousness, boastfulness, foolishness. Such characters are in themselves ridiculous; we jeer at such rôles on the stage; we do not act them."

A comparison between such descriptions and the characteristics of the grotesque figures enumerated above, at once shows the intimate connection of the two. There is the same bodily deformity, the grimaces, the large phallus, the baldness, the occasional moodiness of expression; in fact, the generally ridiculous and coarse appearance. The mimes represented various characters taken from everyday life, and so do the grotesques. The mimes had reached their greatest popularity during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, and it is to these two periods that the extant examples of grotesques belong.²

It would in fact be curious if, intensely popular as we know the mimes to have been, we should not find representations of them in ancient art. Bronze and terra-cotta statuettes of actors in the "idealistic" dramas have been readily identified from the

¹ Cf. Reich, *op. cit.*, pp. 61 ff.

² Cf. A. J. B. Wace, *B.S.A.* X, *l.c.*

masks they wear.¹ Representations of the Phlyakes, or comedies given on Dionysiac festivals in Magna Graecia, are familiar from a certain class of South Italian vases.² But representations of the famous mimes have hitherto been identified in very few monuments.³ Perhaps the reason the "grotesques" have not readily suggested actors is that they do not wear the mark of what we have been accustomed always to associate with ancient theatrical personages—the mask. But, as we have seen above, we are expressly told that the actors in mimes wore no masks and no buskins, so that that difficulty is removed.

In conclusion, I wish to point to an argument which certainly favors the identification of grotesque figures with mimic actors rather than the theory that they were used as charms against the evil eye. If we regard them as charms, each figure stands as a unit; if as actors, they are not units, but, so to speak, part of a company. Not that the statuettes were not probably made to be sold singly, but in their character as actors they necessarily must be conceived as associated with other figures. Now, we actually have some monuments in which figures, unmistakably like our "grotesques," are brought together, evidently acting a drama. One is the terra-cotta group, published by Watzinger,⁴ in which three men, identified by an inscription as *μιμολόγοι*, are apparently impersonating a disobedient slave, an angry master, and an amused youth. Even more striking are the representations found on Arretine ware where grotesque figures of every description are engaged in what are evidently various dramatic scenes.⁵

¹ Cf., e.g., Winter, *Die Typen der figürlichen Terrakotten*, II, pp. 414 ff.; Körte, *Jb. Arch. I. VIII*, 1893, pp. 77–86.

² Cf. Heydemann, *Jb. Arch. I. I*, 1886, pp. 261 ff., and the later literature cited by Dörpfeld-Reisch, *Das griechische Theater*, p. 311.

³ E.g. the terra-cotta group from the Acropolis, which actually bears the inscription *Μιμολόγοι* (cf. C. Watzinger, *Ath. Mitt.* XXVI, 1901, p. 1, pl. 1); the few monuments cited by Reich, *op. cit.*, pp. 579, note and 258, note; and the figures in Wieseler, *Denkmäler des Bühnenwesens*, pl. XII, 9 ff.

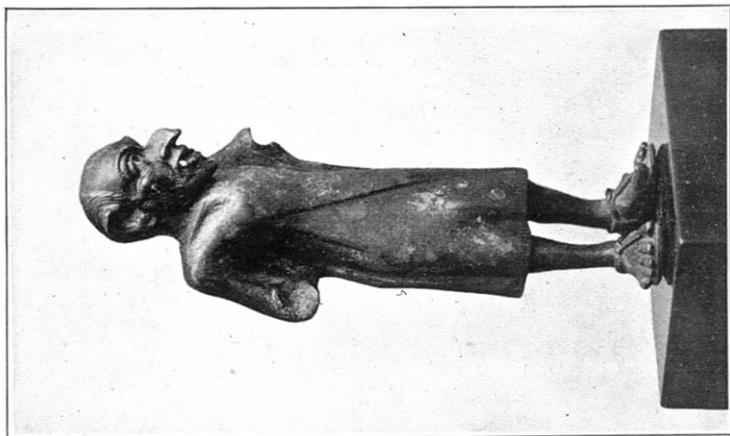
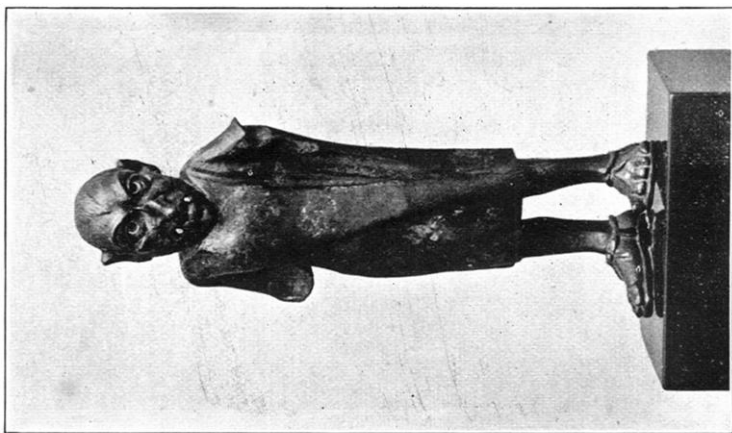
⁴ *Ath. Mitt.* XXVI, 1901, p. 1, pl. I.

⁵ Cf. H. Dragendorff, *Terra sigillata*, p. 78, pl. IV, 23; U. Paqui, *Not. Scav.* 1896, pp. 458–461, figs. 2–7. It is interesting to compare the figure with the head of a donkey on fig. 2, with the terra-cotta figures with animals' heads in Winter, *Typen d. fig. Terr.* II, p. 411.

If our detailed knowledge about the mimes were greater, it would be a fascinating study to pursue this subject further and try to identify the various types of grotesque figures with specific characters in the plays. In the present state of our knowledge, however, this would be so largely conjectural that it would hardly be wise even to attempt it.

GISELA M. A. RICHTER.

NEW YORK, METROPOLITAN
MUSEUM OF ART.



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